

Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society hosts jazz

John Flinn, Chronicle Staff Writer, Sunday, June 1, 2008



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In 1958, Pete Douglas began inviting his beatnik and hipster friends to impromptu jazz parties at his tumbledown beach shack in Miramar, on the San Mateo County coast. Today the bongos are long gone, and so is most of the hair beneath the partygoers' berets - but the jazz is still blowing strong.

Tidied up and expanded, the Douglas Beach House, as it's now known, is home to one of the most unlikely and enduring jazz venues in America: the Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society.

Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Etta James, Dexter Gordon, Stan Getz - they've all jammed in what is essentially Douglas' living room.

The Sunday afternoon concerts still have the bohemian vibe of a beach-shack jam session. Jazz fans stage elaborate pre-show picnics, and they're welcome to bring their own wine into the concerts.

It's an intimate venue, with the 200 or so cafeteria-style chairs arranged so close to the stage that even those in the back can hear the squeak of fingers on the stings of an upright bass. The light show, such as it is, is provided by the setting sun filtering through stained glass windows.

"Jazz isn't something meant to be listened to alone on your iPod," Douglas said. "It's meant to be a communal experience, something shared between musicians and listeners."

Jazz in its many flavors is still the main focus, but the schedule these days also includes world music, classical, and rhythm and blues.

The shows end by 7 p.m., making them an easy day excursion from just about anywhere in the Bay Area. But they're also a great excuse to spend the day and night on the underappreciated area of the coast. You can enjoy a waterfront dinner after the show, spend the night in a romantic hotel and, if you set your alarm, still be in to work on time on Monday morning.

Why now: Douglas is 79, and although he's in good health, there's no telling how long that will last. "This is a mom-and-pop operation," he said. "It will die with pop, I'm afraid. I mean, who's going to replace me?"



The backstory: One afternoon in the early '60s, Douglas and his friends were swing dancing to Bach's Brandenburg Concertos - hey, these were crazy times - when someone set off a load of dynamite on the beach, apparently just for the fun of it. Hence, the Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society.

Checking in: Choices in the area range from '50s-style motels to a Ritz-Carlton. On this visit we splurged on the Beach House Hotel Half Moon Bay, which, despite its name, actually fronts Princeton Harbor, beach-walking distance from the Douglas Beach House. A rung below the Ritz-Carlton in luxury - and price - it's an all-suite place, with many rooms offering views of the ocean or harbor. My suite, the hotel's least expensive, was large, with a separate sitting area, kitchenette, two televisions and a wood-burning fireplace. Service, though, seemed closer to what you'd expect at a Marriott than a Ritz-Carlton; for \$270 a night, it could be a bit better.

Spend your day: Start with some of the best tide-pooling in Northern California at Fitzgerald Marine Reserve, a couple of miles up the coast from Miramar, in Moss Beach. For lunch, call in at Barbara's Fish Trap, an old-fashioned fish shack on stilts above Princeton Harbor. If there's a big winter-type storm churning in the Gulf of Alaska - not terribly likely this time of year - you can scamper up onto the bluff just north of Princeton to watch surfers challenge the 40-foot waves at Maverick's. Or you could walk or bike the paved coastal path that runs from Miramar to Half Moon Bay before returning to the Douglas Beach House at 3 p.m. to reserve your seat and savor your pre-concert picnic.

Dining: Almost next door to the Douglas Beach House, the Miramar Beach Restaurant serves steaks and seafood accompanied by light jazz music most weekends. The building, which once housed a speakeasy and bordello - doesn't it seem as if every California establishment older than Starbucks makes this claim? - has expansive ocean views from most tables, perfect for savoring the apres-concert sunset.

Don't miss: The clam chowder at Barbara's Fish Trap, the best west of the Charles River.

Don't bother: Bringing your beach towel and lotion. The beaches along the San Mateo County coast are justly notorious for fog this time of year.

Word to the wise: Traffic jams sometimes form along the Coast Highway on summer weekends. Rather than try to cut it close for a concert, arrive in the morning and spend the day in the area.

Getting there

The Douglas Beach House/Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society is located at 311 Mirada Road in Miramar, a few miles north of Half Moon Bay. Precise directions can be found on the Web site (below).

What to do

Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society, www.bachddsoc.org, (650) 726-4143. Jazz concerts are on many, but not all, Sunday afternoons, 4:30 to 7 p.m. Check the Web site for schedule. Only Society members (\$250 annual cost) can reserve seats; for everyone else it's first come, first served. Doors open at 3 p.m. Catered food, beer and wine are available, or you're free to bring your own (no food inside the concert room, though).

Where to stay

The Beach House Hotel Half Moon Bay, (800) 315-9366 or (650) 712-0220, www.beach-house.com. Located on Highway 1, just south of the Princeton turnoff and less than a mile north of Miramar. Many suites with ocean or harbor views. Kitchenettes, wood-burning fireplaces, decent continental breakfast. Weekend rates currently start at \$258 for courtyard-view rooms; full ocean views start at \$357, including taxes. On June 13, rates go up by \$40 to \$60 a night.

Where to eat

Miramar Beach Restaurant, 131 Mirada Road in Miramar (virtually next door to Douglas Beach House), (650) 726-9053, www.miramarbeachrestaurant.com. Seafood, steaks with ocean views and live music. Most dinner entrees, \$21.95 to \$36.95.

Barbara's Fish Trap, 281 Capistrano Road, Princeton. (650) 728-7049. Open for lunch and dinner. Lunch for two without wine, about \$25. No credit cards accepted. *John Flinn is executive editor of Travel. To comment, visit sfgate.com/travel and follow the links.*



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